IMPROVEMENT PLANS FOR TOXIC TEAM MEMBERS
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OVMA Great Ideas Conference
Collingwood, ON
June 30th, 2023

Here "toxic team members" are defined as those who have patterns of behavior where they struggle to prevent, recognize, respond to, or productively resolve conflict.

Due to the fundamental attribution error, toxic patterns of behavior can be overattributed to an individual's disposition as opposed to the situation they find themselves in. It is important to address cultural and contextual factors that may be contributing to these patterns. For instance, are there productive and meaningful ways for team members to address concerns?

However, an individual's emotional intelligence, especially their self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, perspective taking, problem solving, communication, and conflict resolution skills can both impact their "toxicity" and their ability to respond to feedback.

Improvement plans are a common human resource tool. Here we discuss how to address the obstacles "toxic team members" pose to using conventional improvement plans and how to modify them accordingly.

Consider termination if…

Temporary relapses would be intolerable**.** For instance, does the toxic behavior pose a significant physical, emotional, legal, or financial risk to people, patients, or the practice? Even with an effective improvement plan, at least temporary relapses or mild recurrences are likely.

The behavior must be resolved in less than 12 months. Executive level, evidence-based, coach-supported improvement programs take at least 12 months for coworkers to notice meaningful improvements in behavior.[1]

Team members cannot offer a meaningful second chance. Sometimes teams never believe their coworker will sustain genuine change, even if they apologize, make amends, or behave differently for years. Given the harm their coworker caused, this may be completely reasonable. Unfortunately, repeatedly bringing up past mistakes also undermines the motivation for an employee to improve.

Prognosis is Guarded

Many team members create but fail to follow through on their improvement plans. Successful team members consistently respond and do periodic (ideally at least monthly) follow-up with their team members.[2]

**Why improvement plans are still worthwhile**
Practices usually want to use an improvement plan because they're trying to retain an otherwise valuable employee. While the odds of improvement are small, if the plan does work, they get to keep that employee. Plus, if it works, it shows the entire team that change and personal growth are possible.

If the employee leaves or must be terminated, it still shows other team members that leadership takes problem behavior seriously while also giving them a second chance. The process helps makes it less likely the employee will be surprised by a termination and documents communication with the employee about the problem.

Benefits of the following approach:
- Show why change is in their interest
- Give them ownership over any improvement
- Create and enforce boundaries
- Provide support if asked.

The Process:
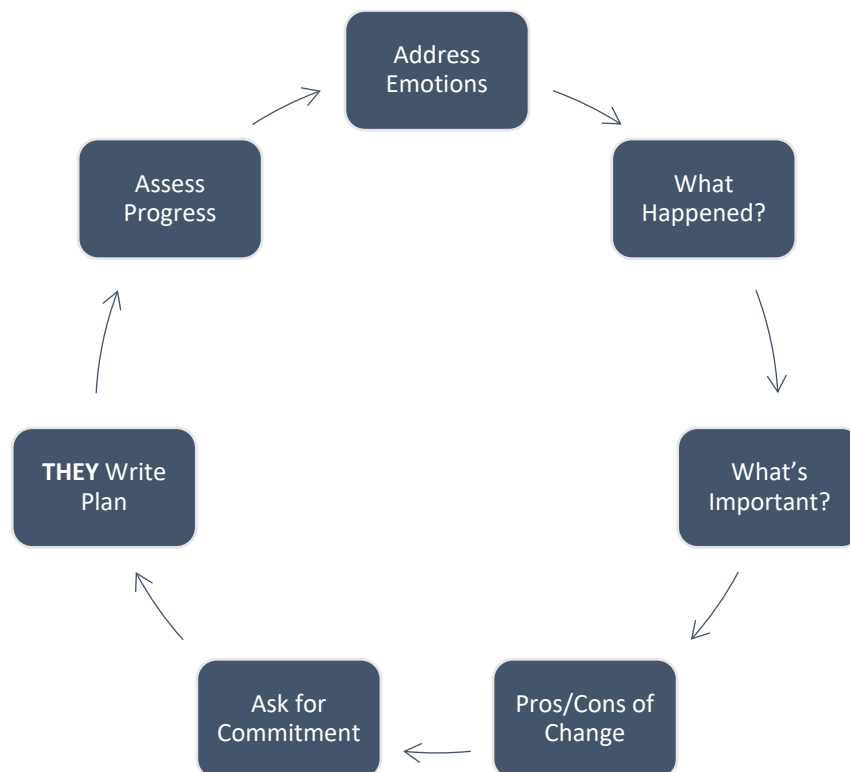
Step 1: Address Emotions

If safety is not an urgent concern, you need not (and often should not) address complex issues immediately. You can address their own emotions first, since the employee will not be able to meet your need for empathy.

Before speaking with the team member, try to cultivate genuine curiosity, the intent to understand their point of view, and the desire to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Ask open ended questions to learn how they see the situation, ask clarifying questions as needed. Where possible, reflect understanding. The goal is to be able to describe the team member's point of view to their own satisfaction.

If emotions get high, pauses of 20 min to 24 hours may be necessary. Own the need to break, express the desire to pause the conversation is so important, and choose a specific time to speak again, making sure to follow-up.

Step 2: Discuss what Happened

Describe what has happened from your perspective as objectively as possible. This ideally includes specific, observable, countable, and/or measurable details of what happened and the results.

Help the team member discuss what has happened objectively by asking clarifying questions and rephrasing/reframing when the team member offers judgmental/subjective descriptions.

Step 3: Discuss What is Important

Help the team member explore or articulate what is important to them in this situation, in their work, or in general. Consider how their current actions might be an attempt to meet their needs.

Share what you believe is important especially what is important to the practice. Mention clear boundaries and non-negotiables at this time.

Step 4: Discuss the Pros/Cons of Change

Help the team member consider the pros of change – what's the downside of things staying the same or the benefit of things getting better? Ask them to realistically consider the challenges of attempting to make things better, what might go wrong or what might they have to overcome?

Step 5: Ask for Commitment

Coerced change doesn't last. The desire to change has to come from the team member. Ask if they feel the benefits of change are worth the potential costs. Are they willing to create and commit to an improvement plan?

Step 6: Team Member Writes Improvement Plan

The team member can start brainstorming solutions based on their needs and the needs of the practice. They should generate as many ideas as possible first, and only once they've run out of ideas choose approaches to start with. They are ultimately responsible for creating and committing to a plan they think will work for them.

It is important for them to include details:
  − Who? Make it clear the team member is the one taking action and responsibility.
  − What? What is the goal? How will they know they have achieved it?
  − How? How will they achieve that goal? What are some of the specific, observable, measurable steps they are going to take?
  − When? When will they take those action steps? When will they achieve their goal? What happens if they don't follow through?

This team and leaders' roles are to establish and enforce boundaries while giving their teammate a realistic second chance. What behaviors are not acceptable? How fast does improvement need to occur?

Step 7: Assess Progress

There are three basic outcomes:

Improvement – Have employee create plan to help prevent or reduce likelihood of recurrence

Follow-through without improvement – Change and recommit to the plan. Setbacks are common and do not constitute a failure.

Lack of follow-through or breached boundary – Plan should have established consequences for what happens. The enforcement of boundaries is the team and leader's responsibility. May result in termination.

References
[1] Mergard, Brandon James. (Jan 2022) The Role of Time in Executive Coaching: A Longitudinal Analsysis of Perceived Change in Leadership Effectiveness.
[2] Wagner, Frank et al (2021) The Coach's Playbook. Stakeholder Centered Coaching by Marshall Goldsmith. p 46-49